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THE DECORATION OF CEILINGS.

(With Illustrations from Original Drawings.)

With regard to interior decorations, there is no more grateful task that can be presented to the artist than that which is afforded by the ceiling, a plane surface which, both in relief-work and painting, is capable of the richest and most varied ornamentation, and thus becomes an integral part of the decoration of churches, halls and drawing-rooms.

Of all the interior surfaces and partitions the ceiling is that which has the least to fear from that enemy to all delicately executed decoration, the injury arising from wear and tear; but what is of still greater importance is that from its very nature it is in most cases spared all further intentional or accidental additions which may very easily give to the whole an effect contrary to that intended by the artist, and one which, so far from carrying out his original idea, may even entirely disfigure its expression. The difficulty which attends the decoration of a dwelling-room is especially increased by the absence of all consideration of the after-influence of pictures and picture frames, of the furniture and other appliances, or the general effect of the arrangement. The case is different with the ceiling, which, though not entirely separated from the rest of the furniture, and corresponding with it by a general harmony of style, still always remains to a certain degree a thing apart, the proportion and general design of which are scarcely to be injured by any extraneous influence.

The reason why the decoration of the ceiling has by no means received the same pattern-like treatment as that of the walls, is to be found in the favorable conditions just pointed out. On the side walls there is required a certain regularity and uniformity, quiet color-

ing and design, in order that the eye may not be fatigued, while on the other hand the upward glance, being less frequent, allows the use of more lively coloring, delicate and fanciful design and more effective modelling, and although the substitutes for a real artistic decoration, paper-hangings, carton-pierre, etc., require a careful consideration, an unquestionably good effect may still be produced by them if the great and simple principles of the true treatment of architectural and decorative features, which have always been the leading ones in all sound periods of art, be strictly adhered to.

There has been no epoch in style in which attention to ceiling decoration has not been of the greatest importance and acknowledged as one of the most worthy tasks of Ornamental Art, and in the course of centuries, the inexhaustible fancy of human genius has travelled through the whole gigantic circle of Form, from the severe Grecian ceiling to the immortal works of Michael Angelo in the Sistine Chapel, from the stalactic ceiling of the Arabian to the star-bespangled vault of ancient and modern Gothic.

Though the principal decorative features of the ceiling depend on the one hand on the style of the period and on the other on the material employed, a twofold style of execution is usually therein displayed which essentially contributes to the characteristic of a whole epoch of style. In the interior visible roof either form and expression is given to its construction, whereby the structural parts are frequently introduced as decorative elements, or both are apparently independant of each other, and the interior roof or ceiling, though never

opposed to constructive necessity, is arranged without any regard to it on purely artistic and æsthetic principles. If we desire still to adhere closely to the traditional utterance of a historical style, then indeed may we be often enticed to throw the constructive element entirely into the back-ground. The constructions of modern times are become very different from those of former epochs, and the utter failure of manifold experiments to give them a truly artistic treatment has taught us that for the present at least we lack that capacity. The continual developments and alterations, the result of advance in practical science, and the spirit of invention, now so rife, do not yet, in a state of transition into which the introduction especially of iron constructions into the art of building has led us, allow the possibility of finding a satisfactory æsthetic form in the new material and for its peculiar, structural features.

The constructive ceiling *par excellence* is the Gothic intersecting or groined vault, which by its projecting ribs is in itself the simplest and most typical decoration. It is only with great care that coloring can be added to this decoration, and the recent restorations sufficiently show the difficulties and consequences usually attending the polychromic treatment of these pointed vaults. The want of that noble rust, the venerable gray of centuries, harmonising the original scale of colors, perhaps more effective formerly, but not so well toned into accordance as they now appear, is no doubt the principle cause of so many unsuccessful restorations of Gothic decorative painting. Striking examples are the numerous recent restorations of Gothic high Altars, which, although designed and executed with much skill, show by no means the desired effect; and often are we led to attribute to a deficiency of work what in reality is merely the want of age.

In Italy during the middle ages, color was differently regarded, for there every design was made for painted decoration, the ribs being weaker, the compartments larger in order to give free scope for the rich display of color and the enhancement of gold, and to realise the marvellous effect of their brilliant harmony.

It cannot be denied that the purely mediæval motives in their limited sphere will ever hold an authorised position, and produce really good effects employed for the modern decoration of walls and ceilings. Especially in the case of pure surface ornamentation, where the effect is produced only by outline, and every attempt to give the appearance of relief by the distribution of light and shade is avoided, the beautifully conventionalised foliage will be applied with great effect to elegant scroll borders and flowers. The easy multiplication of such ornament by stencilling, renders them more suitable for practical use in the modern decorative painting, where however it ought for the most part to be restricted to decided colors, inasmuch as its effect is greatly enhanced by bold and graceful outlines.

In direct contrast with all this, is the ceiling of the Grecian Temple, being constructive throughout, as is likewise the whole style. It was not until the later Roman Architecture that the Antique lost its absolute reliance on construction and that the coffered ceiling appears which forms the leading feature of this style of decoration in the time of the Renaissance. It was Roman Architecture which first produced that sham-constructiveness to which modern times have closely adhered, elaborating the vaulting with fanciful variety of form. Those gigantic works, the great Baths and the Pantheon are its creations, and their lofty and arched ceilings are covered with the most charming and elegant ornaments in stucco and color. The Renaissance improved on these traditions and among their creations the ceiling decorations take a prominent rank. The forms of Grecian Art were modernised, Roman ornaments employed and during the early period many useful and graceful ideas were borrowed from Mediæval Art, and introduced with much ingenuity and spirit into the new compositions. The most excellent schools of painting in the world have contributed by their ceiling decorations to the productions of those works which delight us to the present day and are still our most illustrious models, executed according to the canon of Beauty, whose laws alone are adhered to in the midst of an unbridled freedom in all other respects. To these our eyes turn with admiration, they fill us with a sympathy which testifies how strongly our feelings are attracted and satisfied by the living utterance of an eminently artistic understanding which raises the art of painting to its authorised position, although the whole arrangement is presided over by a sound architectural spirit.

If the decoration of an Interior is to be brought to the highest perfection of pictorial and plastic art, to be executed with all the effective auxiliaries of stucco, gilding and fresco, and a due place to be assigned to the historical element, there will always be a direct connexion with the well known models of the Italian Renaissance. The most remarkable modern works of this kind, productions of the best architects, the theatres, halls, saloons, all make free use, either consciously or unconsciously and frequently without any acknowledgment, of the motives of the Italian Renaissance, simply because it is the most natural and appropriate form of expression for our modern wants and customs. Until now it has not been found possible to attribute to painting any other part in the decoration of the ceilings, than that which the great masters of the sixteenth century have assigned it.

Painting likewise limits the application of the oriental style to interior decoration, although it has just here achieved great works. The essential feature peculiar to it, uniformity in the distribution of color, which almost unavoidably compels a rich and costly application of gilding, does not harmonise with any picture, with which it would therefore be impossible to adorn a room, and

who would wish now adays to renounce such beautiful ornaments as these?

We have already mentioned as the principal motive of the Renaissance ceiling, the coffer or caisson, which has come to us from the antique with the development of the new style. Roman architecture depends more on relief than on color, the place of which is supplied by carved ornament, and though a greater plastic effect is secured thereby, it loses much in brilliancy and delicacy of finish. The arched coffered ceilings of barrel and domical vaults, the sunk panels diminishing in height in conformity with construction, show a decided progress from the original form as illustrated in the soffits, or under surfaces, of many Roman Triumphal Arches, the dome of the Pantheon, and numerous smaller monuments found amongst the ruins of ancient Rome and Pompeii.

We find already here deviations from the original

ful manner than the Romans, and give it all the charms of an untiring variety.

The tunnel-vault of the Pazzi chapel is coffered in the antique style, as are many other buildings of the same period and particularly those of the High Renaissance, such as the splendid vestibule of the Farnese Palace in Rome, where it is only in the somewhat broader frieze that any trace of a freer ornamentation is to be seen, vases, honeysuckle ornament, interlaced bands, etc., being the typical decorative features. The beautiful ceiling in white and gold of St. Maria Maggiore in Rome, where the slender bands are adorned with pilaster ornament, and the coffered tunnel-vault of the Florentine Monument of Marzupini, compartments of which are represented in fig. 1, where the surrounding framework is left plain, with small knobs or flowers at the intersections, are good examples of an emancipation from the traditional antique style.

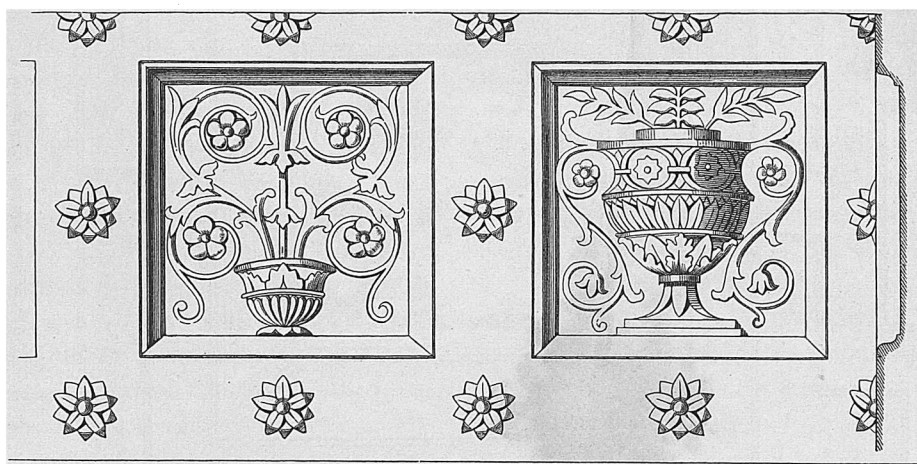


Fig. 1.

Ceiling Compartments of the Monument of Marzupini, Florence.

rectangular and equilateral form of the sunk panels, though the former is retained in most cases as the simplest and most natural, which are marked by the framework which surrounds and divides them, and which the antique adorns usually with running patterns of frets and carvings of bead-rolls, egg and dart mouldings, and with the boldly projecting flower in the centre, a decorative element which the Renaissance especially turns to account in a thousand variations. A characteristic feature of the coffered ceiling is the constantly uniform division of the space, without any partiality for any fixed dimension or any central point of composition, the chief effect of the panelling being produced by the bold, sharply designed shadows of the sunk mouldings, and the projection of the centre flower. The materials for these ceilings are either wood, stucco, or baked clay, the first of which, as a framework suspended from the roof, is a particularly constructive element. Brunelleschi and his school construct the coffered ceiling in a still more fanci-

The school of the Robbia most happily transferred at last this decoration to a new material, to which a great part of the most successfully executed semicircular and domical vaults and tabernacles owe their most exquisite ornamentation. The Dome of Pistoja, e. g., shows an arrangement of yellow rosettes on a blue ground, some tabernacles with sunk perspective carving having the same motive, while on the other hand the coffered ceiling has suggested the decoration of cupolas with angel figures on a blue ground. Here too there is a marked change in the mouldings, which are composed of the most varied members. The egg and dart ornament, carved leaves and pearls, dentils etc., are combined in pleasing succession with rows of consoles; and flowers composed of two, three, etc., or more layers of leaves, but always in uneven division, fill up the centre panel with a greater or less degree of richness, or are replaced by symmetrical ornaments of the most varied kinds, combined with Dolphins, Masks etc.

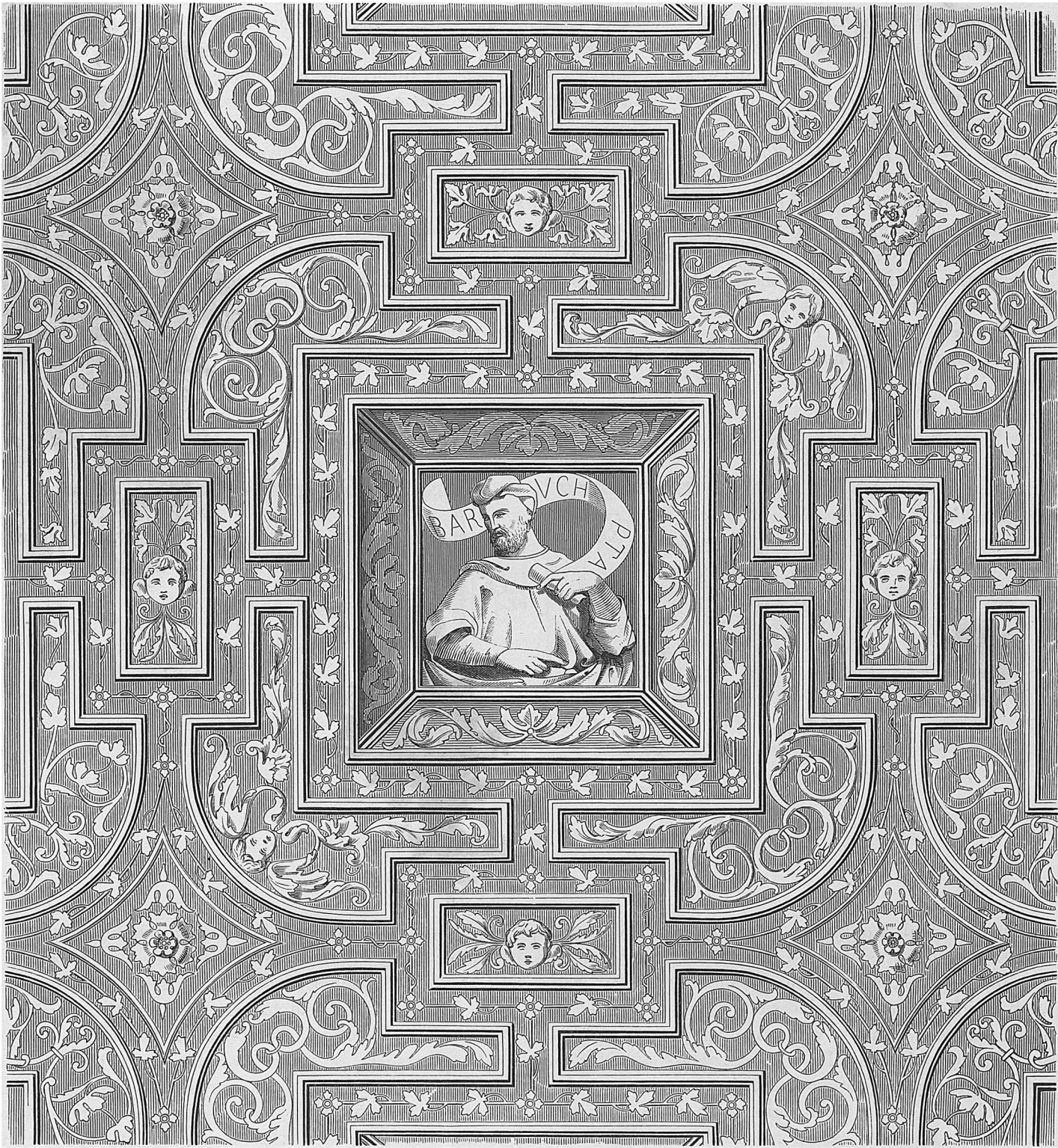
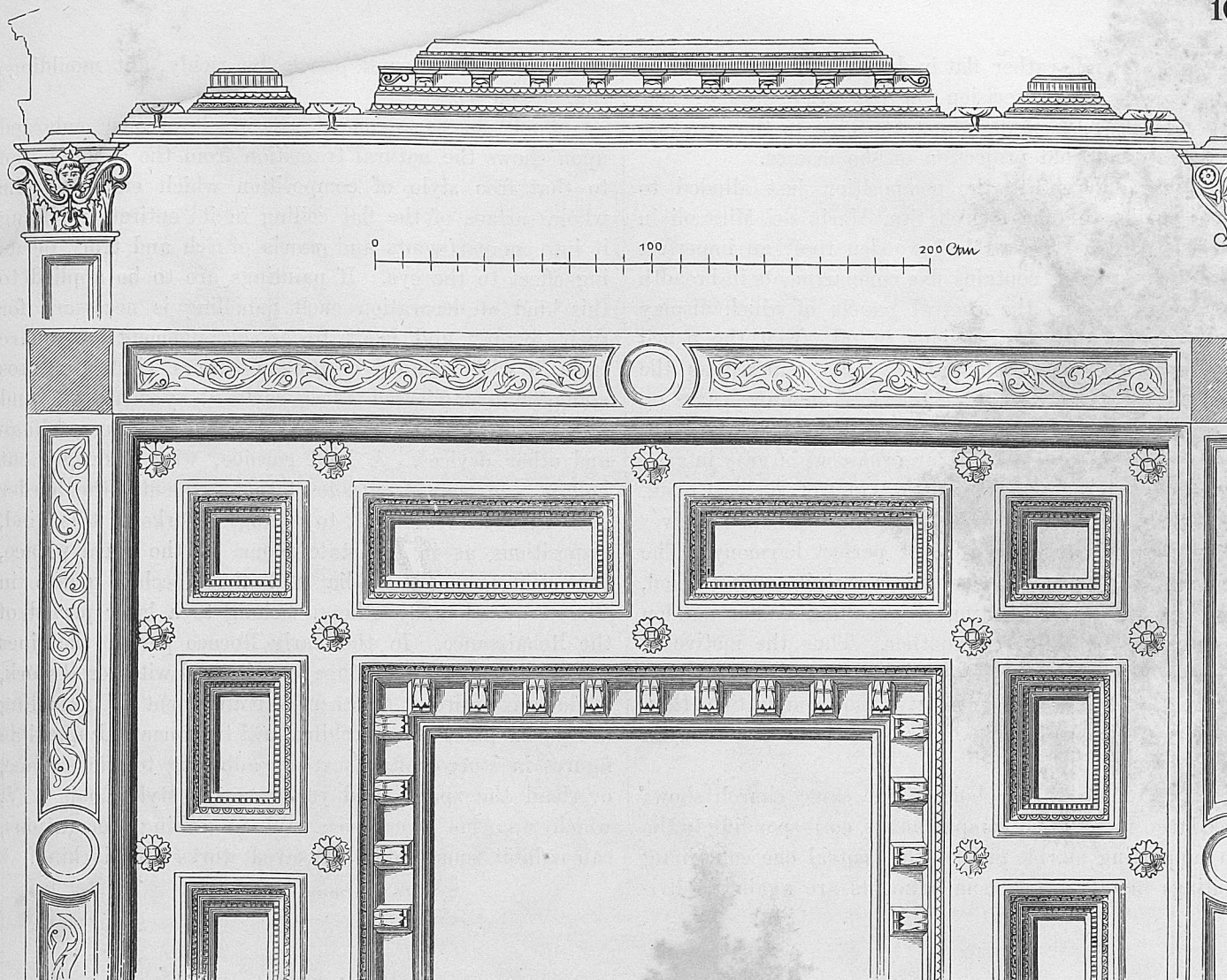


Fig. 2.

Ceiling of the Church Sta. Maria de' Miracoli, Venice.



Figs. 3 and 4.

Compartment of Ceiling under the Gallery of the Church Sta. Maria de' Miracoli, Venice.

A judicious application and distribution of color or gilding are very successful auxiliaries for marking the sharply designed outline and hinder all indistinctness, even for a distant spectator. So in the ceiling of the church of San Marco in Rome, the ground is dark blue, the flowers in gold, the mouldings gray, to which the arms of the Papacy, a lion with a golden wreath, are applied. So too the panels of the flat ceiling of S. Benedetto in Ferrara are painted gray on blue ground. Deviations from the form of square panels in rows are not unfrequently seen on the flat roofs of secular buildings, and among these one of the most beautiful is that in the chambers of the ducal palace in Mantua, showing oblique rows of square stucco panels, which contain gilt monograms on a blue ground. In the same palace may also be seen on the ceiling of the cabinet of Isabella d'Este a charming combination of circular and octagonal compartments, intersecting each other and presenting spaces most suitable for the reception of a rich ornament of gold on blue ground which is very tastefully arranged, springing up from candelabra and scroll-work. Throughout the whole of Italy the colors most frequently to be met with in the polychromic treatment of such decora-

tive parts are blue and gold; in the compartments of the Venetian ceilings, otherwise considerably modified, they are again preserved, nor indeed can a happier combination be easily found. In the less lofty chambers of Venetian buildings the mouldings of the compartments are, with a nice discrimination, made less salient, avoiding by this means the common fault of many modern architects, whose ceiling decorations are often too heavy for the proportion and other ornamentation of the whole interior space.

The above named intersections of different forms or figures of compartments only form the transition to a further complication of arrangement which by its frequent repetition on one and the same vault or ceiling over large spaces produces a symmetrical and regular appearance. Here also Italian art offers many excellent models, e. g., the Corridor of the Sacristy of S. Spirito at Florence, where circular panels are inscribed within square compartments, and joined together by transverse ribs, the four resulting spandrels being appropriately filled in with figures and ornament in relief.* The

* See Vol. I, Part. 2.

contours, though rather flat in detail, show with wonderful clearness and precision on the gray ground, notwithstanding the reigning dimness owing to the exquisite treatment and bold projection of the masses.

Quite different to the composition just alluded to is the ceiling of the church Sta. Maria de' Miracoli in Venice, (fig. 2). The arched wooden roof, an imperfect semi-circle in form, contains five compartments in breadth and ten in length, the central panels of which display representations of the Prophets in oil, from the pencil of Pennacchi. Ribs gilt in the same manner as the flowers, and a red border ornament of running leaves on a brown ground accompany the chief lines of the compartments. The panels show an ornament of gray in gray on a dark colored ground, which is not of the best taste. But although the whole ceiling is deeply darkened it gives in its entirety an impression of perfect harmony. The constructive arrangement is also in a certain sense marked, the compartments consisting of panelling and a wooden framework joined to one another. Thus the motive of the panelled ceiling is honestly and truly expressed, and a greater lightness given to the composition than would have been possible if it had been executed in stucco.

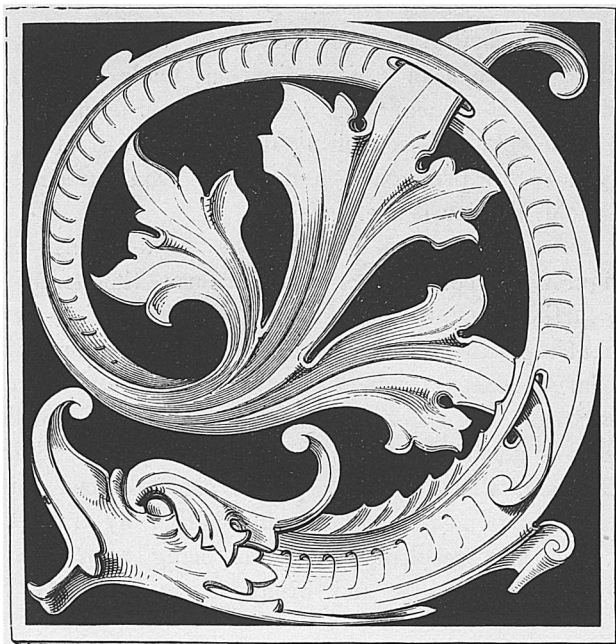
The ceiling of the choir of the same church shows three large rectangular compartments, corresponding to the two supporting marble-pillars, the central one containing paintings in oil, which compartments are again subdivi-

ded into smaller sunk panels by richly gilt mouldings (fig. 3 and 4).

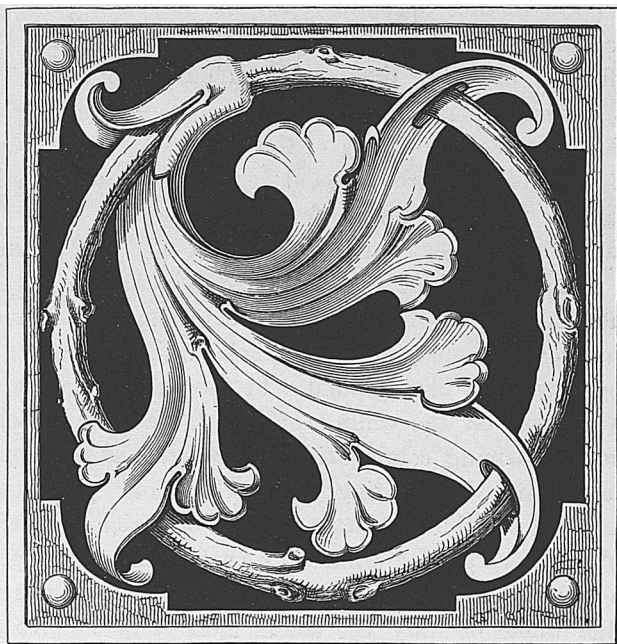
Such an arrangement as we have just enlarged upon shows the natural transition from the coffered roof to that free style of composition which embraces the whole surface of the flat ceiling in its entirety, dividing it into compartments and panels of rich and truly pleasing effect to the eye. If paintings are to be applied to this kind of decoration such panelling is necessary for their display and leads to an arrangement of square surfaces with rounded or broken corners, circles, ellipses and other complicated forms, enclosed by richly gilt and carved mouldings, and relieved by festoons, flowers, foliage and other devices. A bold cornice, with a deeply cut hollow, and row of consoles forms frequently the border and transition from wall to ceiling. Works of this kind, dispositions as in the state rooms of the ducal palace, the ceiling of the Badia and the Vecchio palace in Florence, and many others, belong to a later period of the Renaissance. In the early Rococo period the lines are distorted, the mouldings overcharged with scroll-work, while an entirely arbitrary arrangement of panelling usurps the place of an architectural treatment. Impossible figures in stucco, often scarcely adhering to the surface, overload the space; and yet even the style Louis XIV, which was not over successful in ceiling decorations, can exhibit some nobly conceived works of this kind.

(The conclusion in our next.)

SPECIMENS OF ORNAMENTATION.



No. 1.



No. 2.

Nos. 1 and 2. Square Panel Ornaments.